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WOODCOCK ON NEST, CHANNEL LAKE, INDIANA

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AN INTIMATE ACQUAINTANCE WITH WOODCOCKS.

BY GERARD ALAN ABBOTT.

The woodcock still exists in considerable numbers where favorable conditions for feeding and nesting are to be found in the great lake region. They were probably more numerous fifteen years ago when I first undertook a detailed study of their habits, but a greater time elapsed between finds because I was not "On to their ways."

Quite a few of us have probably seen a sitting woodcock. They are to be found when scarcely any other birds are involved with the duties of nesting. The find is an impressive one, and each and every naturalist who chances upon a *Philohela minor* squatting on the leaves is likely to transmit the news to his fellow friends.

It is not difficult to photograph this bird during the twenty-one days she or her mate may be covering the eggs, and a personal acquaintance may be formed.

I have probably been among the breeding woodcock at some time or other every hour out of the twenty-four, and it was not until I had seen and heard much of them between sunset and sunrise that any feeling of intimacy existed.

Rarely have I observed "borings" near a sitting bird. The ground they use for nesting purposes is necessarily damp at



WOODCOCK ON NEST, CHANNEL LAKE, INDIANA

the season when they are laying, but I would not consider it wet in comparison with much of the adjacent territory, which is apt to consist of marshes, lakes and spring holes. I have no doubt but that the woodcocks probe for earth worms in the earth immediately surrounding the nesting site, but this locality is not muddy nor oozy enough to retain the perforations caused by the bird's bills.

Large, chalky deposits caused by the birds are without exception very much in evidence near the nest. It is sometimes possible to locate the nest by following these daubs upon the leaves. Again the droppings may occur seventy-five yards from the nest, and in the cover used by the male as a roosting place during the daytime.

In little openings where the male goes forth at sundown for the song flight is another likely spot for chalk marks. The peculiar nasal "pink," as it sounds to me, is first heard shortly after sundown at intervals of every five minutes during the first half hour. If the day has been extremely cool and wet the males seem less ardorous, and the call may be uttered two or three times prior to the first flight.

We will presume that a typical April day has drawn to a close. The temperature is about 50°. We are in northern Illinois groping our way through the brush on what appears to be an old moraine of Lake Michigan. From yonder clump of willows a rather shrill call startles us. Surely no Night-hawks are about, for it is too early in the year to even expect them, yet the sound was decidedly suggestive of the call note of our "bull-bat." My companion is quite sure the author of this weird sound is only a few rods away. But, as we move cautiously in the direction, the sound is repeated, but we do not seem to be any closer to the object of our search. The bird is an adept ventriloquist and is probably six or seven times as far away as we had first supposed. While we are gradually gaining upon him other males are heard calling, and the wooded area harbors several woodcocks, each calling in turn, until the notes vibrate through the spring air like the trilling of tree-toads or the singing of katydids on a midsummer's eve. We hasten to a point of vantage before



WOODCOCK ON NEST, POPLAR LAKE, INDIANA

the performance begins. I know every foot of the ground, but before stationing ourselves for the occasion several conditions are to be taken into consideration. If there is any moon we want to be in full sight of it, and if possible let us get on the windward side of the bird. The woodcock, like his relative the jack-snipe, is sure to leap into the wind as he starts to fly.

Twice a woodcock has flown before us in a noiseless manner. The wing motion consisted of half strokes only, and the course was horizontal and only moderately rapid. These two flights were very similar to those of the Upland Plover. Those who have seen the graceful Bartramian will recall that the wing stroke is comparatively short and rapid. I have never seen this flight of the woodcock described by other observers, but on such occasions the wing is highly concave, and only the tips seem to extend below the level of the body during any part of the stroke. This method of navigation is an abrupt contrast to the jerky, zig-zag flight used by the birds as they arise from cover when disturbed or flushed. Occasionally on wet April days I have witnessed this silent flight of the woodcock. It is apparently used when they are flying to and from their feeding grounds, and it is not improbable that the same flight is maintained by the birds during their protracted journeys while migrating.

The third and most interesting form of locomotion immediately follows an emphatic "pink." The wing beats are so rapid it is impossible to distinguish them, as the bird progresses slowly in a circular course. The distinct whistle from the edged primaries of a flushed bird is entirely different from the sound we now hear. This same woodcock passes before us so like a great hummingbird, but the circles he makes in the air are growing less in circumference as he rises spiral like against the yellow rays of the moon. A series of gushing, warbling notes issue from his throat. A remarkable vocal demonstration for such a droll looking bird. The buzzing of the wings have ceased. The bird is three hundred feet above and the apex of his flight has been reached. The song ceases and the performer volplanes silently to the same

cover from which he arose and immediately resumes the call note.

Despite the fact that I have been a lonesome spectator to these demonstrations for years and years, they are the most fascinating of bird manoeuvres.

The sitting bird successfully suppresses all signs of nervousness as she sits motionless upon her eggs beneath the shadow of a drooping branch or broken stub. It seems impossible to conceive that the same bird (for the male often incubates) is capable of such an animated flight and gifted with the remarkable vocal power which he utters during the mating and breeding seasons.

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#### A TIME WITH THE OWLS.

BY DR. R. W. SHUFELDT, WASHINGTON, D. C.

One afternoon, sometime during the first part of January (1914), when returning from the United States National Museum where I had been looking over some owls, I passed up Tenth Street, only a few paces from the building in which I had been, when I spied, suspended for sale in one of the markets, a fine specimen of the Barred Owl (*Strix v. varia*). It was an old bird in perfect plumage, and I secured it for a quarter of a dollar. Recently they have been quite numerous in this section, and this one was shot within a couple of miles of where I stood when making the purchase.

Several days passed before I could get at this specimen; but when I did, I obtained from it a very perfect skeleton as well as a part of the plumage. On opening its stomach—a practice I never neglect—it was found to contain the remains of three or four small mice. As usual, these remains had formed into “pellets,” principally consisting of hair and bones. Some of the jaws were quite complete, and these I saved, later on showing them to Mr. Gerrit S. Miller, Jr., Curator of the Division of Mammals of the U. S. National